



KOP KINGS OF EUROPE

Day after the

Oliver Holt



CHIEF SPORTS WRITER

IN THE hubbub of the foyer of the Liverpool team hotel yesterday morning, Steven Gerrard shook hands, signed autographs and slapped the backs of his team-mates.

But his hands kept coming back to the shiny medal that hung round his neck from a long red ribbon.

Now and again he would grip it tightly as if he needed to convince himself that the miraculous events of the night before had not been a wonderful dream.

"I fell asleep eventually last night," the Liverpool captain said, "and when I woke up, I still had my medal hanging around my neck. I feel like I never want to take it off."

There was a crackle of magic in that foyer yesterday as the men who had produced the greatest comeback in European Cup final history stumbled down from their rooms.

In one corner, there was Vladimir Smicer, talking about the debt he had wanted to repay Liverpool after they splashed out on the best medical treatment for a serious knee injury.

In another was Jamie Carragher, the last man down after the party the night before, hurrying for the team coach as it began to close its doors.

And sitting quietly at a small table, Jerzy Dudek, the goalkeeper who had made the astonishing double save from Andrei Shevchenko and who finally broke Milan's hearts in the penalty shoot-out.

But as always with this

WHERE WILL STEVIE G START NEXT SEASON?

10/11.....	Chelsea
11/10.....	Liverpool
10/1.....	Real Madrid
16/1.....	Milan
25/1.....	Arsenal
50/1.....	Barcelona

Odds courtesy of Ladbrokes

Liverpool side, everyone clamoured to speak to Gerrard, to press him again about his plans for the future.

He did not retreat from the suggestions he had made in the immediate aftermath of the game that he was intending to commit his future to Liverpool.

And he agreed with what boss Rafa Benitez had said a few minutes earlier that the constant speculation surrounding him helped to derail Liverpool's Premiership season.

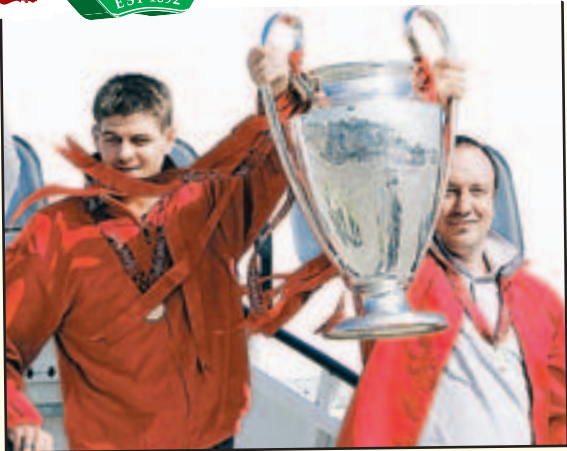
But most of all, he was still alive with the electricity of the night before when a team that was 3-0 down came out for the second half and stunned the football world.

"The manager came in at half time and he calmed us down basically," Gerrard said. "He drew some things on his board, he made a few changes and he said that we should just try to score early."

"He said if we scored early, it would change the game. I couldn't concentrate. I don't know what was going through my head. It was weird. I was sitting there and my head was in my hands."

"I thought it was over. In extra time, I spoke to a few of the lads on the pitch and we were all tired. I was running on empty even with 10 or 12 minutes of normal time still to go."

"Milan had played the ball so quickly and so fluently and cleverly that we were lucky to be 3-0 down at half time. It took a lot of us chasing their shadows because we



DYNAMIC DUO: Liverpool want to keep Gerrard and Benitez

This is just the start of a Kop Rafalution... the real work begins here

A NEW Anfield era began in Istanbul on Wednesday night.

But Rafael Benitez knows this is only the start and there is still lots of work to be done to build a squad capable of domination at home and abroad.

Winning the Champions League was a fantastic achievement but it will be fascinating to see how many of those heroes from the Ataturk Stadium will still be at the club in a year.

Even the manager has admitted he has only half a dozen top-class players he wants to keep.

Remember this is a group of players which lost 14 times in the Premiership this season and would still only finish fourth in the next campaign unless more changes are made.

But the massive bonus of winning the Champions League in Benitez's first season is the boost it will give to this rebuilding.

It should allow him to keep Stevie Gerrard while also attracting other quality players to make the push into the top three and become a regular Champions League side.

Defend

It is so important not only because of all the money it will bring to a club still heavily in debt, especially if Liverpool are allowed to defend their trophy.

But top-class players will also now want to come to Anfield to play for the European champions.

The whole of Europe was talking about the atmosphere in the semi-final win over Chelsea. Now the whole world will have seen this amazing win. To show that spirit - and no little skill - in the second half was a great advert for the club.

Benitez has a long shopping list. He will be looking for a new goalkeeper, even though Jerzy Dudek was probably his best player in the final, a new centre-back, a left-

back, another midfielder to play off the strikers and another striker if he sells Milan Baros.

But the Spaniard has to be careful over who he brings in from La Liga. Xavi Alonso has been a great signing, while we have still to see the best of Fernando Morientes. Luis Garcia has good and bad days.

But Benitez's worth to the club just grows. He has been there only a year and he has already won the biggest competition with a lot of ordinary players.

He has made some of them play even better than even they thought they could.

The way Djimi Traore performed in the first half, he wouldn't get in the Dog and Duck pub team on a Sunday.

But after the break, on the left side of a back three, he was a totally different player.

That was down to the manager.

He made a mistake with his original line-up but he had the 'balls' at half-time to solve the problems.

Mark Lawrenson

FOOTBALL'S NO.1 EXPERT



KOPPING A EURO JACKPOT

LIVERPOOL'S Champions League heroes will be rewarded with bonuses worth £100,000 a man.

But that expense will be more than covered by the club raking in an extra £5million from kit suppliers Reebok, and club sponsors Carlsberg.

Liverpool earned at least £20m from prize money and TV fees during their march to glory in Europe, a total that could still increase.

Their deals with sponsors are structured to rise dramatically with any success, which means manager Rafael Benitez will have a summer transfer kitty of at least £35m to bring top players to Anfield, plus any revenue he raises from sales.

HOW IT BREAKS DOWN...

- Qualifying for group stage: £1.25m
- Performance bonuses in group stage: £800,000
- Qualifying for last 16: £1.25m
- Making quarter-finals: £1.36m
- Getting to semi-finals: £1.82m
- Winning final: £4.54m
- TV money from market pool: £9.18m
- TOTAL: £20.2MILLION

BIGGEST AND THE BEST: Gerrard won't let go of his greatest prize - Liverpool's Champions League trophy

night before.. and Liverpool party is just starting

We gave everything for this trophy and these medals.. I never want to take mine off

GERRARD'S ANFIELD PLEDGE



PARRY with chairman Moores

TNS OFFER PLAY-OFF CUP HOPE

FROM BACK PAGE

Benitez, chairman David Moores and chief executive Rick Parry all called on UEFA to inject sanity into their rules. "The whole world wants us to play in the Champions League next season now," Parry said. "Given the breathtaking nature of the result, it is going to look very silly if we are not in the competition next season. "Every UEFA meeting I have ever been to, the champions have been on the schedule to defend the trophy." UEFA meet in Manchester at the end of next month to make a final decision on whether England could be awarded an unprecedented fifth spot in the competition.

One way into the tournament was offered by TNS - who are willing to give up their place if the Reds beat them in a play-off. "I'm keen to invite them to play us with our Champions League spot up for grabs," said owner Mike Harris. "And why not - it's a way out of everyone's problems. I sympathise with Liverpool." UEFA have already reserved a place for the Champions League winners as one of 16 sides who automatically qualify for the group stage. Under their regulations, 15 sides qualify automatically through their domestic leagues and join the Champions League winners, and the other 16 places are filled through the qualifying rounds.

UEFA's issue is that each country is limited to a maximum of four places in the competition and England - along with Italy and Spain - already have four sides who have qualified by finishing in the top four in the Premiership while Liverpool finished fifth. Benitez said that it was illogical not to include Liverpool. He said: "Common sense says we should be allowed to defend the trophy." FA chief executive Brian Barwick insisted they would keep lobbying UEFA. He said: "We are in a situation now of how do we, for good sporting reasons, find a way to persuade UEFA that they should find room for Liverpool?"

could not get near them. I never once thought in the game that we were going to win it. "When Jerzy made that double save from Shevchenko, just before he hit it, I thought 'goal', and I knew that would be the end of it but then when it went over the bar, I thought maybe it was going to be our day. "I was down to take the fifth penalty so I was especially delighted when Jerzy saved from Shevchenko. The manager had asked me whether I wanted to take one and I said 'yes'. When he told me he had put me on the last one, I thought 'cheers'."

Perhaps the kind of status that Gerrard will enjoy now that he is a European Cup winner, now that he has inspired such a great victory, will calm the dilemma about whether he can satisfy his ambitions at Anfield.

Concentrate

Benitez was careful to avoid any criticism of his captain but he was clearly relieved that the months of speculation about Gerrard's future appeared to be drawing to a close. "I think the Steven Gerrard saga affected us in the Premiership," Benitez said. "He played a lot of good

games but maybe with a couple more of them, we would have been in the top four.

"Steven is a top player and people were talking all the time about him joining Chelsea or Real Madrid. When you are young and you feel for your club and people are talking about you going to another club, it is difficult to go into all the games with the right mentality."

Gerrard did not bristle when he heard what Benitez had said. It was not a day for taking offence.

"The manager's right," he said. "I did not play well enough this season.

There was a time when everyone was asking me about the future, urging me to make a decision.

"I could not concentrate properly and it was getting to me. I decided to stop it and put everything on hold until this season was over. I had to get my head right.

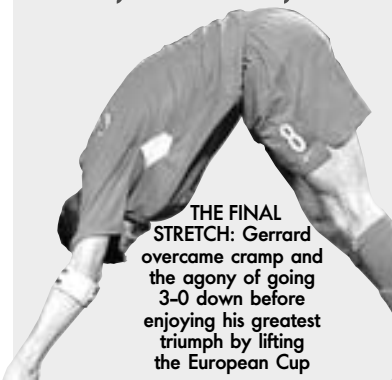
"I was a better player for it. I can promise Liverpool that I will be a better player next season. All it needs now is for me to sit down with the management and discuss a new contract. There are a few bits and pieces that still need to be sorted out."

Initial talks have already taken place and it is now expected Gerrard and his agent Struan Marshall will meet chief executive Rick Parry to formulate the deal which would see the England midfielder sign a contract worth as much as £100,000 a week.

When he had finally inched his way out of that foyer and into the cool air outside, Gerrard wandered over to a quiet part of the hotel grounds as he waited for the coach to fill up.

He stared out at the ships queuing up to slide down the Bosphorus and his hands wandered once more to that golden medal hanging from his neck.

PAIN, FATIGUE, RAW EMOTION.. BUT IT WAS ALL WORTH IT IN THE END



THE FINAL STRETCH: Gerrard overcame cramp and the agony of going 3-0 down before enjoying his greatest triumph by lifting the European Cup

